A Guide to Gaithersburg's Historic Sites

Produced by
The City of Gaithersburg
31 S. Summit Avenue
Gaithersburg, Maryland 20877
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Cover Photo:
Baltimore and Ohio Railroad Station 1989

Introduction

Gaithersburg is great! It is today and it was yesterday according to Lee M. Lipscomb, a realtor, who wrote in 1891, "Gaithersburg combines most of the advantages of a city, with the comforts and economy of the country, a high elevation, good pure water, delightful climate, churches, schools, good society, shady streets and market houses."

The town was named for Benjamin Gaither who, around 1802, built his home near the historic Forest Oak tree. By 1850, the population had grown to 43. There was a hotel and several stores, primarily along Frederick Road. The first post office in Gaithersburg was the Forest Oak Post Office.

In 1873, when the B & O Railroad initiated service to and from Gaithersburg, the commercial-industrial center shifted to what is now Olde Towne. The population had grown to 200 and the town reported a postmaster, a railroad agent, three blacksmiths, three millers, a doctor and a shoemaker. On April 5, 1878, Governor John Lee Carroll of Maryland signed the important act to incorporate the Town of Gaithersburg in the heart of Montgomery County.

The "Town" was elevated to "City" status in 1968 and celebrated its 100th birthday in 1978. During the centennial festivities, the community developed a keen appreciation of Gaithersburg's civic pride and rich history. This new community awareness led to the City's adoption of its first "Preservation of Historic Resources Ordinance" in 1981. The City's elected officials have been applauded by the community for the foresight to acquire and preserve seven of the City's treasured historic landmarks: City Hall, the B & O Railroad Station, the Wells-Robertson House, the Summit Hall Farm, the Casey Community Center, the Latitude Observatory and the Frederick Tschiffely Mansion. City Hall, the B & O Railroad Station and Freight House, and the Wells-Robertson House were recognized as outstanding restoration projects and winners of Montgomery County Preservation, Inc. awards.

Gaithersburg City Hall 1989

1. Summit Hall Farm - 502 South Frederick Avenue

Gaithersburg grew up around several tiny settlements, the oldest of which was "Log Town", established around 1765. The oldest known structure still standing in Gaithersburg is a log-chinked storehouse built in "Log Town" around 1785. That storehouse now stands a few feet from the mansion at Summit Hall.

In 1806, James and Catherine (Fulks) DeSellum formed the nucleus of the future "Summit Hall" with their purchase of a one-acre lot in "Log Town". By 1857, when their children, John T. and Sarah DeSellum patented "Summit Hall", this small tract had increased to a 251 acre estate which stretched from the north side of the present Father Cuddy Bridge to south of the present Summit Hall Farm Park property.

In 1886, John sold the property to his cousin, Ignatius Fulks. DeSellum retained title to the family graveyard located approximately 300 yards from the house. In 1891, he was buried there next to his father, mother and sister.

Ignatius Fulks and his family operated "Summit Hall" as a farm until his death in 1931 at the age of 99. In 1936, the farm was sold to Frank and Nettie Wilmot, a Washington, D.C. family.

Through every phase of its history, "Summit Hall" has played a vital role in the community. It was the site of Gaithersburg's first school in 1859, and it is the site of the present Gaithersburg High School, which was built in 1951. John and Sarah DeSellum donated a portion of the property for the Ascension Episcopal Chapel (Site #2). Another part of the property was leased by the United States Coast and Geodetic Survey to build the Gaithersburg Latitude Observatory (Site #3).

In 1948, William H., son of Frank and Nettie Wilmot transformed "Summit Hall" into the first scientifically grown sod turf farm in the United States. The new Zoysia grass, planted in plug form, was recommended by radio legend Arthur Godfrey, and the orders poured in to Summit Hall Farm. The volume of mail was so great that the Gaithersburg Post Office was elevated to first-class status. The lawns around several of the monuments in Washington, D.C. and at Arlington National Cemetery are examples of the Summit Hall Turf Farm's product. Advancements in agronomy were made through the dependable turf grasses and better alfalfa grass strains which were developed here during the mid-twentieth century.

The City of Gaithersburg purchased the remaining 57 .5 acres of Summit Hall in 1982. The green lawns, ponds and woods of the "Summit Hall Farm Park" are now used for recreational purposes and the next few years will see the development of an outdoor pool complex and multi-purpose center. The City's Parks and Recreation Department offices are located at this historic site.

2. Ascension Episcopal Chapel - 205 S. Summit Avenue

This church built in 1882 is located on land donated by John T. and Sarah DeSellum. The board and batten chapel with its Gothic Revival lines was constructed by a local barn builder. The interior columns were made from molds used in the National Cathedral in Washington, D. C. In 1980, a modern facility was constructed just behind the little chapel to accommodate the growing needs of the church. The chapel is the City's oldest remaining church.

3. The Gaithersburg Latitude Observatory - 100 DeSellum Avenue

In 1898, the International Geodetic Association in Pottsdam, Germany, established a network of observatories to measure the wobble of the planet on its axis by plotting the locations of specific stars. This Gaithersburg hill top was chosen along with sites in California, Ohio, Italy, Japan and Russia, all of which lay along the same latitude (39°8' N). Edwin Smith, Gaithersburg's first observer, designed this wooden building to replicate the iron construction of the foreign stations. The roof was designed to part in the center on two sets of tracks to allow the reflecting Zenith telescope to aim at the stars. Knowledge gained from the observations recorded here nightly until 1982 is still used to assist scientists in the study of the Earth's geophysical make-up, as well as to provide data for space satellites. The Federal Government deeded the property to the City in 1986 with the proviso that the property be preserved as a historic monument for public benefit. The restoration of the Observatory was completed in 1990, and plans are underway to construct a new science center on the site. The Observatory is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is the City's first and only National Historic Landmark.

Gaithersburtg Latitude Observatory c. 1900

4. Olde Towne Gaithersburg

The area surrounding the intersection of Diamond and Summit Avenues has served as Gaithersburg's foremost commercial/agricultural/municipal center since 1870. The coming of the railroad in 1873 brought prosperity to the area and many of the buildings of that era remain today. Unfortunately, fires in the early 1900's destroyed many early buildings and led to major remodeling of others. The catwalk at Bowman's Mill towers over Olde Towne reminding visitors of the days gone by when this area was an important agricultural center. Turn-of-the-century buildings at the intersection of Diamond and Summit Avenues are still evident today; although, if not for the 1891 date on the First National Bank Building and the familiar gable on Etchison's Drugstore, these two buildings would be difficult to identify. On the other corners, the 1903 Belt Building and the B & O Railroad Station, constructed in 1884, have been restored and are listed as local and National Register Historic Sites. There are several other Olde Towne buildings which have been preserved and reused making the past part of the City's future. These include the Gartner Funeral Home and residence at 316 and 320 East Diamond Avenue and the 1903 Exchange Building, a designated historic site, at 124 East Diamond Avenue. Other preservation projects which contribute to the historic character of Olde Towne include the attractive turn-of-the-century frame houses along the north side of East Diamond Avenue and those which front Park and Russell Avenues. Olde Towne was also home to the first community Fire Department at 13 East Diamond Avenue. The existing 1930 building housed the Department until 1977 when the new station was built at Russell and Montgomery Village Avenues.

Preservation success within Olde Towne has been due in large part to the City's Community Development Block Grant funded revitalization program which started in 1981.

5. B & O Railroad Station and Freight House - 5 South Summit Avenue

The Baltimore and Ohio Railroad Station and Freight House are the City's foremost landmarks and symbolize Gaithersburg's proud history as a "railroad town" The impressive brick buildings were constructed in 1884 during the B & O Railroad's dynamic expansion program. Designed by Ephraim Francis Baldwin, they were lauded as handsome replacements for the small frame building which served as the depot between the time single track rail service was completed to Gaithersburg and when the new station was built.

These distinctive buildings played a key role in attracting businesses to the Diamond/Summit Avenues area. By the turn-of-the-century, Gaithersburg was a thriving industrial, commercial and cultural center. The extension of double tracks past the town necessitated an addition to the station circa 1905. Time took its toll on this busy station, and by the 1960's signs of demolition by neglect were apparent. Deeming repairs too costly, representatives from Chessie Systems indicated the buildings would be demolished. Determined to preserve this important piece of Gaithersburg's past, the City's elected officials authorized purchase of the endangered buildings and site in 1984. In 1988, the City received a preservation award for restoration of these landmarks.

After 106 years, the Station continues to serve commuters daily. The west end, which was the original Ladies Waiting Room, now features the Gaithersburg Heritage Alliance museum. The Freight House has been retrofitted to offer meeting and exhibit space for the National Historic Railway Society.

6. Wells-Robertson House - One Wells Avenue

The Wells-Robertson House is located on land that was once part of the 1723 land grant known as "Deer Park". Henry Miller, a prominent businessman, and his wife Rosa acquired this lot in 1885 and selected William H. Hilton and Sons of Barnesville to construct their Victorian-style home. In 1895 the Millers moved from this house to their new house which is the present day City Hall (Site #7). From 1895 to 1918, Dr. Israel Warfield and his wife Kate lived here and offered boarding to students from the Fairview Seminary after a fire demolished their school in 1904. The Wells family purchased the house in 1925, and their daughter Mary and her husband John Robertson lived here until the City purchased the property in 1987. Woodriginals completed an award-winning restoration of the Wells-Robertson House in 1988, and the City was applauded by the community for offering this beautiful structure as a transitional home for Gaithersburg's homeless citizens.

7. City Hall - 31 South Summit Avenue

Research shows that the present City Hall building was built for Henry and Rosa Miller in 1895. This handsome house was hailed as being "of the most modern style, having steam heat and hot and cold water". The Miller's moved to this house from their earlier home (Site #6) and lived here until 1910. In 1913, the house was purchased by Edward P. Schwartz, a Washington, D. C., real estate broker. Here he established his famous peony garden which stretched from the railroad tracks to what is now Hutton Street. It included 410 varieties of peonies from all over the world. Each spring the well-known garden was a tourist attraction visited by many admirers, including President Wilson. The garden was also featured in the National Geographic magazine. After Mr. Schwartz's death in 1924, his widow and daughters continued to maintain the garden until it was moved to Seneca Creek State Park in 1944. In 1958 the City of Gaithersburg purchased the estate for a Civic Center. On Olde Towne Day 1989, a ceremony hosted by the Mayor and City Council celebrated the restoration of the historic house and completion of the new buildings; and in recognition of its prominent place in the City's history, the peony was designated the official City Flower.

8. Frederick Avenue/Maryland Route 355

The stretch of Frederick Avenue shown on the map is approximately the same location as the old trail used by the Seneca Indians long before the arrival of the European colonists. Later known as the Frederick-Georgetown Turnpike, it served as a "rolling road" for rolling hogsheads of tobacco to the port of Georgetown. This "Great Road West" continues to play a vital part in the economic development of Gaithersburg.

9. Casey Community Center - 810 South Frederick Avenue

In 1970, Eugene B. Casey donated the 1938 barn and six acres of land to the City of Gaithersburg for use as a community center. The transformation has created an outstanding example of adaptive reuse. While this historic dairy barn accommodates the many needs of the community, it also serves as a present-day reminder of Gaithersburg's early role as a major agricultural center.

Casey Community Center 1989

10. Saint Martin's Catholic Church - 201 South Frederick Avenue

This site was the location of the old Summit Hotel and Fairview Seminary before it was purchased by the Archdiocese of Baltimore in 1914. The original church buildings were two surplus army mess halls from Camp Meiggs, Virginia. On December 12, 1920, the first Mass was offered at St. Martin's by Father John S. Cuddy, who was the first resident pastor of the parish. He lived at the Schwartz family home (Site #7). During the eight years he served the parish, he was responsible for the 1924 construction of the first Catholic school in Montgomery County and the 1925 acquisition of the Lodge House (Site #14) for a convent. Father Cuddy was killed in a tragic accident on December 7, 1928, when his car was struck by a train on the nearby Frederick Avenue at-grade crossing. His successor built the rectory in 1926 . Ground was broken for the present St. Martin's Catholic Church in 1957. The old school and a small house were demolished in 1988 to make way for the new school. On December 7, 1987, 59 years from the date of the tragedy, the new Route 355 Bridge over the historic grade crossing was dedicated to Father John Stanislaus Cuddy.

11. The T. I. Fulks' House - 208 South Frederick Avenue

The Thomas Iraneus Fulks House, built in 1897, has been designated as a local historic site both for its association with a family prominent in the history of Gaithersburg and as an outstanding example of late 19th century Victorian architecture in the Queen Anne style. The original owner was the great-grandson of Baltus Fulks, one of the earliest inhabitants of what is now Gaithersburg. Thomas Fulks was a successful businessman and farmer who was also active in local politics and community affairs.

12. The L. D. Lodge House - 9 DeSellum Avenue

Owned by Professor Lee Davis Lodge, and shown on the original boundary survey of the Town prepared in 1894, this T-shaped house is a significant example of the common two-story, three-bay vernacular house form. Professor Lodge was the son of Rev. J. L. Lodge (Site #14), and is mentioned as one of the promoters of the 1888 annexation which nearly doubled the size of the town. The later addition to the house is used as a dental office.

13. S. T. F. Sterick's Cottage - 13 DeSellum Avenue

This house is a good example of late 19th century architecture with its wrap around porch, decorative brackets and patterned gable shingles. Lee M. Lipscomb's "Gaithersburg - Its Advantages", published in 1891, features a picture of "A Game of Lawnaquet at Sterick's Cottage" on page 22. Mr. Sterick patented and manufactured his invention, but the City has been unsuccessful in attempts to locate an existing Lawnaquet game.

14. Waverly House - 10 DeSellum Avenue

This late Victorian/Italianate styled home was constructed in 1886 for the Rev. James L. Lodge, a Baptist Minister and founder of the Waverly Club. An 1890 Montgomery County Sentinel newspaper article speaks of this "lovely home, 'Arnmore,' with seven acres very rich, beautiful, elegant house, bath, outbuildings, all new with every variety of fruit". Since its construction, "Waverly" or "Arnmore" has been associated with members of the Gaithersburg religious community. In 1925, this property was acquired for the St. Martin's convent.

15. P. M. Smith House - 14 Cedar Avenue

Before 1911, when the Observatory Heights Subdivision was added to the Land Records of Montgomery County, the Philemon M. Smith house fronted on Route 355. According to assessment records, the house appears to have been constructed circa 1878. This fine old farmhouse continues to serve as a residence.

20
MONTGOMERY AVE
MARYLAND AVE
RUSSELL AVE
Gaithersburg Elementary School
23
Brookes, Russell & Walker Historic District
Constitution Garden
Forest Oak Cemetery
22
21
WALKER AVE
PARK AVE
EAST DIAMOND AVE (MD RTE 124)
19
18
BROOKES AVE
B & O Railroad
4
5
5
Fair Grounds
24
STREET
25
Olde Towne
17
6
Wells-Robertson House
B & O Railroad

MEEM AVE
FLORAL
DIXIE
WEST
DIAMOND
WATER STREET
TO
7 City Hall
SUMMIT
SOUTH
FREDERICK AVE
RTE
TO
CEDAR AVE
JAMES STREET
Gaithersburg
High School
Gaithersburg:
Historic Sites

16. PEPCO Substation - 101 South Frederick Avenue

On June 11, 1913, PEPCO officially turned on the first electricity in Gaithersburg. In 1938 they contracted Harold Ward to build a substation to accommodate the area's growing need for electric service. Today this small brick building stands at the entrance of the new and larger 1990 substation.

17. Forest Oak Tree - 5 North Frederick Avenue

This historic tree is recognized and respected as the oldest landmark in Gaithersburg. A boring of the tree, taken in 1975 by the Maryland Forest Service, showed it to be over 275 years old at that time. According to J. Thomas Scharf's "History of Western Maryland," this famous old tree was on the same lot as the home of Benjamin Gaither for whom the town was named.

18. Carson Ward Store - 101 North Frederick Avenue

Carson Ward, prominent businessman and citizen, operated his store at this location from 1890 to the early 1920's. He was the son of Henry Clay Ward who was one of the primary movers to incorporate the town. The old store building was renovated in 1989 and lost nearly all of its original historic features. The site which once combined the Carson Ward home and store serves as a modern day bedding shop.

Carson Ward Store c. 1919

19. Grace United Methodist Church - One Walker Avenue

This elegant structure of Romanesque design, with beautiful stained-glass windows and wood-shingle trim was constructed in 1905 as a successor to the small Forest Oak Methodist Episcopal Church South (Site #20) . The bell in the tower is inscribed "Presented by the Young Ladies of Grace M. E. Church South 1905". The education building was added to the church in 1960; another modern addition was made in 1980.

20. Asbury Methodist Village - 201 Russell Avenue

This beautiful 106-acre site is at the end of Walker Avenue. In 1877 John Wesley Walker acquired the site along with a residence from Eveline Gaither Hughes, daughter of Benjamin Gaither. He later sold the homeplace to his son-in-law, Walter Magruder. The trustees of the 1921 Methodist Conference agreed to purchase Magruder's "Rolling Acres" for a retirement home. The first Asbury building opened its doors in 1926 and offered lodging and care to approximately 50 elderly residents. Sixty-four years later, Asbury continues to operate as a long-term personal care provider for the older adult and it has about 1,000 persons living on campus. The original building is now used for the Administrative and Development Offices and also features historical and antique displays, including Asbury's outstanding doll collection.

21. Brookes, Russell and Walker Avenues Historic District

This residential district consists of 54 buildings on Walker and Brookes Avenues linked by the west side of Russell Avenue: part of the 1888 Russell and Brookes Addition; and the 1904 J.W. Walker's Addition to Gaithersburg. It has changed very little. One enters tree-canopied avenues lined with 49 Victorian and early 20th century buildings with spacious front porches, bay windows, tin roofs, wood exterior sidings embellished with fishscale shingles, ornamental windows, and wooden gingerbread trim. In style, they range from late Victorian Queen Anne/Eastlake houses to 1930 Colonial Revivals. A Victorian Gothic-Revival church, built at 14 Brookes Avenue in 1891 as Epworth Methodist Episcopal Church, now houses the Interdenominational Church of God.

George Barber designed the highly detailed Victorian house built in 1895 by banker Robert Moore at 24 Brookes Avenue. With a second story porch and "praying madonna" railing, it is the most elaborate of the district's seven late-Victorian "cottages" with wings and bays and wrap-around porches. Other houses, such as livery/stable owner William O. Dosh's late-Victorian Colonial Revival house at 20 Brookes Avenue and the house at 31 Walker Avenue, incorporate colonial or classical revival features. Traditional "L"-shaped farmhouses or tri-gabled "homestead" houses also had followers. The George Woodfield house at 5 Walker Avenue is one of four in the district.

Cheaper to build, easier to care for and heat than the Victorian cottage, 23 foursquare houses were built in the district. The folk-Victorian foursquare typically has turned porch columns and gingerbread trim, a mitered three-window bay and a decorative attic window in the shingled front gable. Good examples are the Darby House at 17 Brookes Avenue and its neighbors at 16, 13, and 11. The Georgian or Classical Revival foursquare house has Doric columns and a "Widow's Walk" on the roof like the Waters/Chiswell House at 21 Brookes Avenue and many on Walker Avenue. Tapered square columns, vertically-paned windows and central roof dormers identify 20th century American Craftsman foursquare houses like the Thomas house at 8 Walker Avenue and the Murray Walker house at 4 Walker Avenue.

The 20th century also brought the arts and crafts movement to Gaithersburg in craftsman-influenced bungalows like the brick, stucco and shingle 1-1/2 story Plummer House at 10 Brookes Avenue and the frame one-story Martin/Wilkerson bungalow at 27 Walker Avenue. It also brought a taste for "authentic" Colonial Revivals such as Dr. Miller's brick house and office at 7 Brookes Avenue, the frame colonial at 106 Russell Avenue and a Dutch Colonial at 16 Russell Avenue. Most of the larger houses were built on multi-lot parcels with orchards, chicken coops, gardens and a stable, while the average house had one lot. Three houses have retained their original one acre lots.

The historic district, Gaithersburg's first, was designated by the Mayor and Council in 1987.

22. The Forest Oak Cemetery

In 1866, Elijah Thompson deeded to the Trustees of the Methodist Episcopal Church South a portion of the land for the Church's burial ground. This was the beginning of what is now the Forest Oak Cemetery. Over the years, several additions were made to the cemetery. In 1906, a law was passed prohibiting the establishment of any burial ground in the Town without the consent of the Mayor and Council. Today the Town's first cemetery remains the City's only cemetery.

23. The Talbott House, 309 North Frederick Avenue

The Talbott House was constructed in a craftsman bungalow style in 1921 for Foster and Rosalie Summers and is part of the "Realty Park" subdivision of the James B. Gaither estate. The platting of this new subdivision between Maryland and Montgomery Avenues extended the town's 19th century boundaries to the north and west. Named for Roy L. Talbott, one of the former owners, the house adapts well to its modern use as a beauty parlor. As part of an effort to save a vestige of the vanishing residential character of Route 355, the City designated the Talbott House as a local historic site in 1989. The restoration of the bungalow has been approved as part of a redevelopment plan for the site.

24. The Montgomery County Fairgrounds -16 Chestnut Street

In 1949 about 5,000 people gathered in Gaithersburg to help with the construction of the Montgomery County Cooperative Agricultural Center. By the end of the day, 9 buildings to house livestock, exhibits and the center's offices were completed. The other buildings at the Fairgrounds were constructed later by the same outpouring of community good will. The first Montgomery County Fair in Gaithersburg was held August 25 - 27, 1949. The Fair is held each year during the last week in August.

25. The Thomas Cannery - East Diamond Avenue at Chestnut Street

The Thomas and Company Cannery was the only food cannery in Montgomery County and the major employer within the Town of Gaithersburg. It operated from 1918 until a fire damaged the complex in 1962. The remaining cannery building has been designated as a local historic site and is being considered for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. Plans for restoration of the Cannery and redevelopment of the site have been approved by the City.

26. Chestnut Street

The properties lining Chestnut Street, Meem Avenue and West Diamond Avenue were once part of two 18th century farms known as "Zoar" and "Rawlings Rest". Martha and George Meem purchased the 200 acres comprising this area in 1862 and 1863. After her husband's death in 1879, Martha moved to her new home, The Meem House, at 104 Chestnut Street. This historic homeplace as well as other structures within the area built from the 1870's to the 1930's, have been preserved.

Meem House c. 1890

27. WSSC Depot - 112 West Diamond Avenue

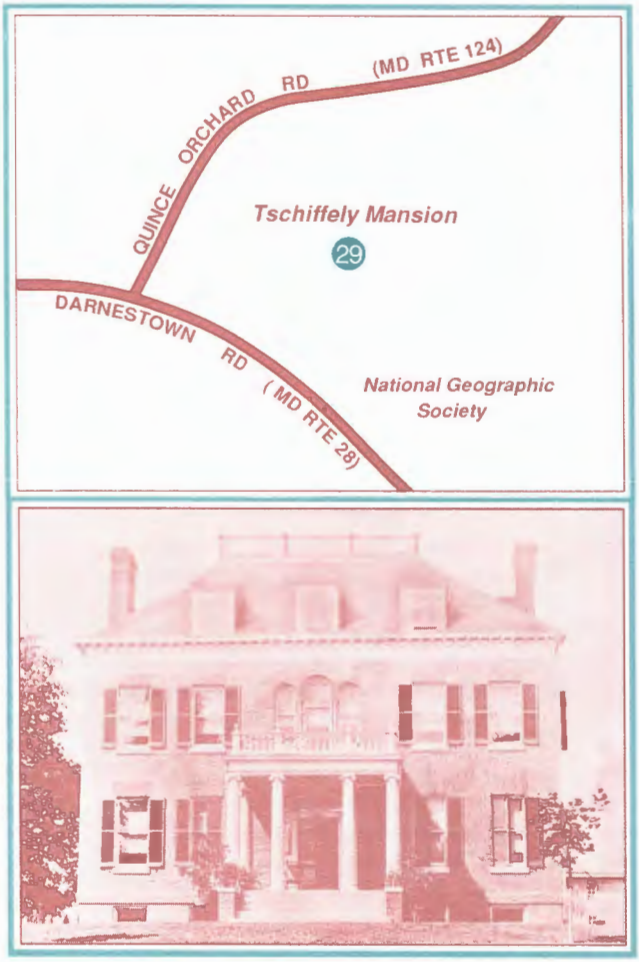
The site was purchased by WSSC in 1928 to be the location of Gaithersburg's first water and sewage plant. The site was equipped with a pump house, well and storage tanks. According to Mayor and City Council records, the system was nearing completion in August of 1928. This facility operated until 1975 when the new WSSC Servicenter was constructed on the opposite side of West Diamond Avenue. The pump house was demolished as part of the Muddy Branch Road Improvement Project in 1988. A new day care center has been constructed on the site. The water tank and three small brick buildings which housed valves to control the water flow were preserved as a reminder of the town's original water plant.

28. The Amiss House - 124 Water Street

The original portion of this historic house was built in 1877 for Edmund Amiss, Gaithersburg's most prominent educator. When Professor Amiss' first wife died in 1878, he sold the property to Vandelia and Thomas Owen who built the south addition to the house in the early 1880's. The house was moved back from its original footprint in 1941 and stands today on Water Street in the middle of a new housing development. The Amiss House is designated as a local historic site.

29. The Frederick A. Tschiffely Estate

Located on the map below at the corner of Route 28 and Quince Orchard Road, the historic estate of Frederick A. Tschiffely dates back to his first land acquisition in 1852. Through subsequent transactions, the "Wheatlands" estate grew until it totalled in excess of 600 acres. In 1900, F. A. Tschiffely, Jr., constructed the brick mansion. According to a City-contracted history of the property, "the Tschiffely House is an early and significant example of Georgian Revival architecture in Montgomery County". Mr. Tschiffely was a pharmacist who spent winters at the Wardman Park Hotel and summers at this country estate. The house was changed dramatically after the property was sold to Otis Beall Kent in 1942. The present owner has proposed a unique village plan for the estate which preserves the historic buildings, and he is deeding the restored Tschiffely mansion to the City of Gaithersburg.



Tschiffely Mansion c. 1900

This brochure was designed to provide a condensed guide to historic sites in the City of Gaithersburg. We regret that every historic site could not be included in this directory and apologize for any errors or omissions in the information.

Please keep in mind that the only historic buildings listed in this brochure which are regularly open to the public are the B & O Railroad Station and Freight House (Site #5) and City Hall (Site #7).

For more information about the sites listed in this directory, or for additional historical information about the City of Gaithersburg, please call City Hall at 258-6310.

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